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ABSTRACT

Common problems encountered in teaching Chinese that involve classical, intentional malapropisms (learned errors) are discussed. Three aspects unique to Chinese are addressed: (1) since Chinese writing is logographic, some malapropisms occur because of similar graphs; (2) since many expressions come from classical Chinese, and instruction in classical Chinese has decreased considerably, even competent writers may use inappropriate characters to represent classical expressions; and (3) due to obscure origins of some modern expressions, they may be represented arbitrarily by characters unrelated to their original meaning. In the last case, American students using the dictionary for every unknown character may become very confused. A variety of expressions and their written forms, divided into types, are listed. Although no clear, specific short-cut is available for learning the expressions, the teacher is reminded to be aware of the potential for confusion and the essential role of classical Chinese in the reading of vernacular Chinese. It is suggested that when encountering a confusing character, one should: replace it with a character that looks like it to see if it makes sense, replace it with a charater that sounds like it to see if it makes sense, or try to interpret the unit in which it appears, as a whole. (MSE)

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Malapropism As a Complicating Factor in the Teaching of ~~Reading~~ Written Chinese

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The term 'malapropism', as you probably all know, originated from a character in Richard Sheridan's play, "The Rivals", in which the character, Mrs. Malaprop, unwittingly displays her vanity and ignorance by her amusing misuse of words. Used as a technical term in linguistics and psychology, however, malapropisms do not have to be (indeed, usually are not) characterized by a speaker or writer trying to talk above himself. They mean simply 'speech blunders' -- words somehow misused in place of similar words. Malapropisms represent, of course, a common phenomenon in speakers or writers of all languages and of all ages. For this reason, it has been thought that, through the study of malapropisms, psychologists and linguists can perhaps gain a better understanding of human brain, especially how it stores (or files) words in its memory data bank, or "the internal

dictionary", and how it retrieves needed words from its data bank. Along this line of thinking, we may identify two different types of malapropisms, the intentional ones and the inadvertent ones. Intentional malapropisms, also known as classical malapropisms, are those which result from a person's learning the wrong word to begin with, i.e., incorrectly filing a word by the brain in its memory. Thus, a person using a classical malapropism is not aware of it and usually insists that he is using the "right word" until convinced otherwise. Inadvertent malapropisms, on the other hand, result from minor malfunctions of the brain in retrieving the wrong word which is stored somewhere close to the right word in the memory bank. They are kind of the "slips of the tongue" which even the user himself would immediately correct when he becomes aware of them. It is sometimes not easy to differentiate the two types of malapropisms. The only sure way is to question the speaker or writer who used them.

The focus of this paper is, however, <u>not</u> on the psychological/linguistic implications of malapropisms. My interest is directed more to the pragmatical/pedgogical need in the teaching of reading. Naturally, I will concentrate on classical malapropisms only. In all languages, the cause for malapropisms is both phonological and semantical. That is, a malapropism and the word it replaces are often quite close in both pronunciation (spelling) and meaning. This is certainly also true for the majority of malapropisms in Chinese, but

there are at least three things which make the Chinese case somewhat unique and, therefore, more troublesome to foreign readers of Chinese writings. First, since the Chinese writing system is logographical, some malapropisms occur not because of pronunciation, but because of the similar look of the graphs involved. For example, 剛復 (gāngfù) is used for 剛愎 (gāngbì) "headstrong", and 草管人命 (cǎoguǎn rénmìng) for 草菅人命 (cǎojiān rénmìng) "treating human lives as dirts". Secondly, since numerous expressions in Modern Chinese originated from Classical Chinese and Classical Chinese training has been greatly reduced in public schools, especially in PRC, even highly competent writers may now use improper characters to represent these classical expressions. Thirdly, due to the obscure origin of some modern expressions, they may be represented arbitrarily by different characters which are completely unrelated in their original meaning. For example, 麻胡 (máhú) is the same as 馬虎 (mǎhǔ) "just so-so". For these reasons, our students in the United States, who tend to decipher a piece of writing by checking every unknown character there in a dictionary, may indeed be very much confused.

My interest in this subject was first aroused about two years ago when I got a chance to read the post-"Cultural Revolution" short stories from PRC. I immediately realized that these stories would be good reading materials for our students, but I was also amazed by the rather frequent imprecise use of words even by such famous writers as Gao

Xiaosheng (高晓声) and Jiang Zilong (蒋子龙). Once I began to collect what I regarded as misused words, I realized that they are quite common and widespread. In some cases, they may have been so well-established that it is now difficult to tell which is the proper word and which is the misused one. Following are some examples I have picked out mainly from three collections of short stories, namely, Selected Short Stories of 1980 (1980 年短篇小说选), Selected Short Stories of 1981 (1981 年短篇小说选), and The Inauguration of Director Qiao and Other Stories (乔厂长上任记). A few are from the Guangming Daily (光明日报) and the Central Daily (中央日報), or simly from the "tip of my pen". I have tentatively classified them into several different types. Each of them has a semantic explanation, but to simply the matter, I am not going to discuss that here.

A. Malapropisms of ordinary modern expressions due to similar pronunciation in Pekingese. (Misused words are followed by the proper words in parentheses.)

1. 直接(截)了当 Zhíjiē(jié) Liǎodàng, "clear-cut; straight-forward."
2. 决(绝)不可以 Jué(jué) bù kěyǐ, "absolutely not."
3. 截止(至)目前 Jiézhǐ(zhì) mùqián, "up to now."

4. 蚀(折)本儿生意 Shí(shé)běir shēngyì,
"bad business."

5. 势力(利)眼 Shìlì(lì) yǎn,
"snob; snobbish."

6. 年青(轻) Niánqīng(qīng),
"young."

7. 歪打正招(着) Wāidǎ zhèngzhāo(zháo),
"hit by luck."

8. 昏(晕)了过去 Hūn(yūn)le guòqù,
"fainted."

9. 个(各)人有个(各)人的命 Gè(gè)rén yǒu gè(gè) rénde mìng,
"Fates are different."

10. 抓住一点不及(计)其余 Zhuāzhù yìdiǎn bùjí(jì) qíyú,
"stick to one point and ignore the rest."

In the following expressions, some elements are altenatives, rather than right or wrong.

11. 他们大都/多是学生 Tāmen Dà dōu/duō shì xuéshēng,
"They are mostly students."

12. 统统/通通错了 Tǒngtǒng/tōngtōng cuòle,
"all wrong."

13. 吸/汲取教训 Xī/jī qǔ jiàoxùn,
"draw a lesson."

14. 急欲/於知道 Jí yù/yú zhīdào,
"eager to know."

15. 别/白字 — Bié/Bái zì, "misused words."

B. Malapropisms due to dialectal influence.

1. 金戒子(指) — Jīn jèzi(zhi), "gold (finger-) ring."

2. 涸泽(辙)之鱼 — Hàozé(zhé) zhi yú, "fish in a drying puddle."

3. 自(只)想自己 — Zì(zhǐ) xiǎng zìjǐ, "thinking of oneself only."

4. 心里捉摸(琢磨)着 — Xīnli zhuōmō(zuómó)je, "toy with an idea."

(The above are caused by the loss of retroflex initials in some dialects.)

5. 终生(身)大事 — Zhōngshēng(shēn) dàshì, "marriage."

6. 低身(声)下氣 — Dīshēn(shēng) xiàqì, "extremely humble."

7. 政权就是镇压之权 — Zhènquán jiùshì zhènyā zhi quán; "Political power means the power to supress." (Notorious remark by Li Biao.)

(The above are caused by the loss of contrast between -n and -ng in Southern Mandarin dialects.)

8. 你跟(给)我滚　　Nǐ gēn(gěi)wǒ gǔn!

"Get lost, you!"

(Syllable final -en changed to -ei in some Henan dialects.)

9. 老(恼)火　　Lǎo(nǎo) huǒ,

"upset."

10. 馬料(尿)水　　Mǎ liào(niào)shuǐ,

"The place where the horse urinated." (a place-name in Hong Kong.)

11. 花蕊/蕾　　Huāruǐ/lěi,

"flower buds."

(The above are caused by the loss of contrast between n- or r- and l- as initials in some dialects.)

C. Malapropisms resulting from misunderstanding and misinterpretation of Classical Chinese terms. (These are mostly the result of "folk etymology". The misused words in examples of this kind are often very close in pronunciation to their correct counterparts, though semantically they may be completely unrelated. Consequently, the expression with the correct word and the expression with the improper substitute may, in theory, mean two different things, but in practice, they actually mean the same thing. That is, Chinese speakers do not really differentiate them. Almost

every one of them has a long story behind it, which would be too time-consuming to relate there.)

1. 坚忍(韧)不拔	Jiānrěn(rèn) bùbá, "determined; persistent."
2. 坚(艰)苦奋斗	Jiān(jiān)kǔfèndǒu, "struggle on against all odds."
3. 奇(其)丑无比	Qí(qí) chǒu wúbǐ, "extremely ugly."
4. 恭(躬)逢(与)其盛	Gōng(gōng) yú(yù) qíshèng, "to be present in a big event."
5. 温文而(尔)雅	Wēnwén ér(ěr)yǎ, "elegant and graceful."
6. 听天有(由)命	Tīngtiān yǒu(yóu)mìng, "resign to fate."
7. 死生由(有)命	Sǐshēng yóu(yǒu)mìng, "Length of life is predecided by fate."
8. 可望而不可即(及)	kěwàng ér bùkějī(jí), "possible to see but impossible to reach."

Sometimes two or more elements in the same expression may be variables, generating several different versions of representation, but all with the same meaning. This is possible mainly because of the multiple definitions of some

of the elements in the expression. Following are two examples.

9. 邪(斜)魔(门)外(歪)道 Xie(xie) mo(men) wai(wai) dao, "unorthordox ways; heresy."

10. 莫明(名)奇(其)妙 Moming(ming) qi(qi)miao, "weird; extremely strange."

From the examples given above, it can be seen that malapropisms in written Chinese are formed mainly because of misidentification of phonological "sound-alikes" and misinterpretation of Classical Chinese expressions. As said before, they can be very confusing to our students who have a strong but understandable tendency to stick to each and every character in an expression when they try to interpret it. In the final analysis, the only sure solution for the problems in reading caused by malapropisms in the part of the writers is to improve one's own language proficiency, but in the Chinese case, while there is no short-cut for our students, we, the teachers, can at least warn them of these pitfalls. Our students should be emphatically reminded of the importance of "phonological interpretations". A good understanding of the sound system of Pekingese, and those of other dialects, especially Mandarin dialects, is certainly a useful one. They should also be made to see the crucial role of Classical Chinese in the reading of vernacular Chinese. In more practical terms, we can perhaps tell them that, when

they encounter a character which does not seem to make good sense in the context where it appears, they should:

a) replace it with its "look-alikes" and see if it makes sense, or
b) replace it with its "sound-alikes" and see if it makes sense, or
c) ignore it, but try to interpret the whole unit, wherein it appears, as a compound.